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## **National Parks Wrestle with Traffic Jams**

By Amy Kane

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - An estimated 58.2 million Americans are expected to visit national parks this year on vacation but they won't be leaving traffic jams and long commutes behind.

Urban debates over congestion and public versus private transportation are also being played out in scenic areas from the Yosemite Valley in California to Cades Cove in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

``On a summer day or a fall weekend during peak leaf season, your visit is mostly a windshield experience," said Don Barger who monitors Cades Cove, in Tennessee, for the National Parks Conservation Association. ``You follow the tail lights of the guy ahead of you and by the end, you missed the entire reason you came."

Two million people a year visit Cades Cove, the most popular part of the country's most visited national park. On a peak days, as many as 6,000 people will visit the valley, an idyllic swath of green dotted by 19th-century log cabins, cemeteries and a grist mill.

The main route through the cove is an 11-mile (17 km) one-lane road. It doesn't take much to have drivers slow to well below the 25 mph (40 km) speed limit.

``One good bear eating along the road can back up traffic for a while," Miller said. Rangers are routinely dispatched to "bear jams," but most of their efforts to keep traffic moving are futile, he said. On a peak day, the road can take as many as four hours to travel.

### **JUST BEGINNING**

At the Great Smokies, the transit planning is in the beginning stage, said park spokesman Bob Miller. Park administrators and local officials are looking at options, from electronic messaging boards indicating road conditions to a bus system, to ease the congestion.

The electronic boards are ``low-tech" and will probably do little more than tell people how bad the traffic ahead of them is, Miller said.

A system might shuttle visitors from nearby Townsend, Tennessee, to picnic areas, hiking trails and scenic overlooks within the park. But shuttle buses are hardly the perfect solution, Miller said.

To get people through the park at the same rate they now travel by car, he said, one bus would have to leave a staging area every 90 seconds. At \$300,000 per bus, a full fleet would be too cost prohibitive, Miller said.

``We are now where Zion was five years ago," he said.'

In 1997, the Interior and Transportation Departments signed an agreement to improve transportation at national parks, singling out Yosemite, Zion, Grand Canyon, and Acadia National Parks as demonstration sites.

Since then, Utah's Zion National Park has been recognized by the National Parks Conservation Association, a private nonprofit group, for its efforts. Zion's visitors are required to leave their cars at the front gate and travel the scenic drive on the canyon's floor by bus. At Acadia National Park in Maine, use of the bus system is voluntary.

“With visitor levels growing, the park had to help the parking situation or put up gates to limit the number of people coming into the park,” said Tom Crikelair, the transit planning consultant who designed the system.

In its first year, 1999, the shuttle service eliminated 42,000 vehicle trips, the park estimated. The following year the service added nine buses, bringing the fleet to 17.

“This was an experiment that worked,” he said “Now that we've found that people would use the system we've got to find out what to do to keep this running and whether we are going to expand to meet demand.”

#### 'GRIDLOCK' AT YOSEMITE

In 1997, following a flood that destroyed campsites, washed away bridges and closed the park for three and a half months, Yosemite had considered requiring reservations for those driving their cars into the park. That was met with stringent resistance and was scrapped.

Four years later, the park service approved a long-range plan that restricted parking for day travelers and instituted a region-wide bus system.

But that has not been without controversy, either. Two counties backed out of the deal to run the bus service, saying they feared a negative economic impact. The Sierra Club criticized the transit system's diesel-fueled buses, which they say would not cut air or noise pollution and would require larger roads.

At Yosemite National Park, the traffic situation in the summer still reaches “gridlock” proportions, said Scott Gediman, a park ranger and spokesman.

“You have four highways converging into a narrow valley. Traffic can get extreme,” he said. “People can look for parking for over an hour. It leads to a damaging of the visitor experience.”